All Again

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All Again

by bcofl0ve

Summary

don't you love dear, i'm the boy whose always been
in love with you to the end- and i'd do it all again

Bucky distanced himself after the wedding. Call it what you want, self preservation, selfish- cowardly. But hearing about Marge's death knocked him back- and forward into San Bernardino like a slingshot. He was expecting Gale to be pissed, that much he accepted on the trip from the Pentagon. What he wasn't expecting was the little girl that opened the door instead of his old friend.

Notes

standard disclaimer that this very canon divergent fic based off the show characters not the real people. this fic!john doesn't have a wife and two kids, and for the sake of the story i pushed up when he went to work at the pentagon. enjoy! <3

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: one

"Is he not sacred, even to the gods, the wandering man who comes in weariness?"
- The Iliad

August 27th, 1953. Thorton Air Force Base, San Bernardino.

“Hey!” Bucky yelled as he cranked down the window, rolling to a stop at the intersection. Blakely, who had been walking along the side of the road, looked startled at the call out before he recognized him. And still looked quite taken back after the fact.

“Bucky Egan, am I seein’ a ghost?”

Bucky laughed and shook his head, leaning out the car window just enough to clap his hand, giving the other man's arm a pat.

“You know where Buck lives at around here?”

Blakely blinked, sucking in his bottom lip before he responded, Bucky not sure he liked that reaction. “You two have been talkin’ again?”

“Nah, nah,” He replied, looking away. “But I heard what happened with Marge through some of the guys in DC.”

It fell silent between them save for the breeze blowing through the trees, and the gravity of the past 48 hours starting to sink into his bones for the first time. But he pushed that to the back of his mind and wondered what Gale had told people in regard to their lack of communication, given that he hadn’t exactly been in touch with Blakely enough for him to know they’d stopped talking without Gale telling him as much outright.

It wasn’t *really* a falling out, though it crossed his mind that Gale might have characterized it as one. He did everything Gale had asked of him up to standing next to him at the altar. It was no one’s fault that he needed some space after the fact, or that some space turned into years. Things shook out how they did, and that was that.

Gale tried- he’d always have that on him. But the letters stopped eventually, when, Bucky assumed, he’d realized he wasn’t getting a response.

The longer Blakely went without saying anything the more he worried he'd have to start knocking on doors till he found the man, and he clicked his tongue as he grew impatient. "I'm gonna track him down somehow even if you don't cough up the door number, c'mon."

"0817, go down that road and make the last left turn off," He said, pointing down the street. "But don't tell him I greenlit this."

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Raising his fist to knock on the door, Bucky couldn't help but shift his weight between his heels. Arguably he'd lost his mind or should've at least given the man a courtesy call instead of just showing up unannounced. But he'd seen Gale grieve enough in the 100th to know he couldn't be handling this well, to the extent that he didn't know he'd be alive by the time he got to San Bernardino. He wouldn't say he'd never been guilty of selfish decision making, not when he still wanted the good Lord to let him through the gates of heaven one day. But he didn't think he couldn't sleep at night all the way across the country knowing that he'd really abandoned his friend for good if he didn't show up for him now.

The fear that he was too late was further cemented when the door opened but he didn't see anyone on the other side, and Bucky considered the possibility that he was about to come face to face with a ghost.

Until he heard a small voice.

"Who th-ere?"

Bucky lowered his eyes to the figure in the doorway that just reached the height of his thighs. A wide-eyed little girl looked up at him, her wispy blonde hair pulled back into two small pigtails- blue gingham dress matching the shade of her eyes. Of *Gale's* eyes.

Oh.

"Loretta baby what are you doin' opening the door by yourself?"

He heard Gale rounding the corner into the entry way before he saw his face, his voice tired. He was so focused on the girl, Loretta- apparently, that he didn't seem to see Bucky until he was right there in front of him.

“Hi.” Bucky spat out, unsure of what else to say, and Gale’s head snapped up like a whip, tired eyes widening.

He opened and shut his mouth like he wanted to say something but couldn’t get the words out, did that twice more, and promptly shut the door in his face.

Well then.

Bucky took a moment to catch his breath before turning back around to the porch steps, plonking down with an unceremonial thud. He picked at a splinter in the wood, sucking in the left side of his cheek. Getting the door slammed in his face was one thing- and something he’d been prepared for. Finding out on the fly that Gale had a daughter was another. She couldn’t have been any older than three, so born in 1950, he thought. Years after they stopped talking, meaning there was no reason he should feel so twisted up that he never told him. What would he have even said?

Dearest John,

It's been almost five years since you decided to up and never speak to me again, but you will be thrilled to know, since you were always our biggest supporter after all, that Marjorie and I have a daughter.

But irrational or not, it still made his chest ache to realize he'd missed more than he assumed he did.

He heard a noise behind him and turned his head expecting to see the front door swinging open, but his eyes followed the noise to the window where Loretta was up on the couch, hands patting the windowpane. She gave Bucky a little smile when she realized she’d been noticed, and he felt his heart stutter when he recognized her cheek dimples. She was Marje’s of course, but he could be reasonably convinced that Gale just spit the girl out himself- he thought as he gave her a wave.

She giggled and hopped down off the couch, scurrying in the other direction, and Bucky went back to picking at splinters on the porch steps.

According to his watch it was 9pm when the front door finally cracked open again, four hours after he’d knocked on it. He sucked in a breath as he turned his head, Gale standing there wordlessly for a minute

before he said anything.

“You really didn’t have anything better to do than sit out here all day?” He said finally, voice tight.

“Nope.” Bucky replied, popping the last syllable and lifting his eyes.

“I just put Loretta to bed, so don’t come stomping through and wake her up.”

Gale stepped back to open the door and waited for him to walk through it before he closed it again, Bucky following him into the living room. He felt too awkward to just plop down on his couch, standing with his arm crossed over his body as Gale rested on the arm of the recliner sofa, tapping his foot against the carpet.

Bucky hadn’t gotten a good look at him during the brief interaction earlier. But now that he wasn’t having a door slammed in his face, he studied him as much as he could in the dim evening light of the living room, the only light still on one lamp in the corner. Gale still looked like his Gale- pretty blue eyes, full cheeks with an identical scar on each one. He’d never known a version of the man that didn’t carry heaviness in his eyes, not when they met under the circumstances that they had. The heaviness he found in them now was different though, more resigned, he realized.

Not that he didn’t understand why. It ripped him up inside and drove him as far away from his best friend as he could go, but Marjorie was his world. The part of him that wasn’t chomping at the bit to be a selfish bastard wished he could bring the girl back for him and be on his way.

“So what exactly are you doing here?” Gale said and drew Bucky out of his own head.

“You know why I’m here.”

Gale scoffed at that, which Bucky hadn’t expected.

“Because polio got your competition out of the way?”

He expected *that* even less. Gale had his moments, but he was less confrontational than him- always was.

So he'd picked up two new things, since they'd last spoken, he thought to himself. A kid, and a bark.

“The hell- you really think that poorly of me, huh? I can’t be worried about my friend?”

The response tumbled out of him more defensive than he would’ve preferred it to be, but Gale didn’t rise to it. His tone when he spoke was flat, his hands folded together over his knee.

“We haven’t been friends in a long time John.”

Bucky huffed, too far past the ledge to rein himself in now. “Well it takes two to stay in touch, maybe I would’ve written if I had a letter to write back to.”

He knew he was playing with fire, and that he sounded ridiculous being so brazenly dishonest about how things had fallen apart. But it did exactly what he’d wanted it to, and he saw Gale’s nostrils flare.

“Oh, so I was supposed to keep writing and writing until you decided one was worth a response?” He said, voice going up an octave. “Did that for two fuckin years, would the third one have been the charm you think?”

There was a rebuttal on Bucky’s tongue, but it died when the patter of little feet running down the hall sounded through the house- and Loretta’s little sniffles could be heard before she could be seen.

She made it to her intended destination, Gale scooping her up in one arm and turning away as he swiped at her tears with his thumb.

Bucky looked away, but it didn’t change that he could hear their hushed conversation- Gale assuring the toddler that he knew she missed her mama because he did too. He disappeared down the hallway with her after a minute and returned after a few more, glancing towards the door.

“I’m sure you have a hotel you should be getting back to about now.”

Bucky almost laughed at the look Gale gave him when he seemed to realize the answer to that question, his eyes rolling before he about glared a hole through his forehead, blonde eyebrows furrowed.

“Hey, I didn’t know you had a kid when I was thinking this all out," He said, putting his hands up defensively. Gale nodded tiredly, running a hand over his face as he looked down the hallway.

“Can’t take the guest room ‘cause I’m sorting out Marge’s stuff in there

right now. I'll find you a blanket."

Bucky lowered onto to couch when he disappeared again, slipping his shoes off and sliding them under the lamp table. He didn't see the small picture frame on the table until then, his breath catching in his throat. It was a photo from the war that, if his memory served him right, Lemmons had taken. They'd crammed into a B-17 to play card games during a rainy free afternoon, Crosby and Bubbles on Gale's right- himself on the man's left, an arm winding around his neck pretending to pull a card out from behind his ear.

"Tomorrow, you get a hotel or you can go ask Blakely to bunk you."

Bucky startled a little when he heard his voice, turning around and seeing that Gale had followed his gaze to the picture before it dawned on him that he'd mentioned Blakely. He realized Gale hadn't lost his tenacity for being able to read him when he narrowed his eyes at him as he passed over the blanket.

"Didn't need you to rat him out, he called to confess himself while you were out inspecting my porch." He said, letting out the slightest chuckle. But the brevity was short lived- and it almost seemed like he regretted his own half-joke.

"Called to apologize for enabling this shit."

He flicked the table lamp off for him and Bucky wanted to say something, *anything* to get the last word like he always had. But nothing came to him before Gale was gone, and he was alone to force himself to sleep, something he had a feeling wouldn't come easy.

Chapter 2: two

Chapter Notes

content warning for vague allusion to suicidal ideation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We men are wretched things."

- The Iliad

Bucky dreamed of him that night, nothing new. It was more a flashback than a dream really.

And this particular night haunted him from time to time when he was awake. So he couldn't be surprised it had found him in his sleep too, the Stalag coming into his peripheral as he tossed and turned on the couch.

Gale looked at his shoes, digging a toe into the mud- as if he could create a hole big enough to sink down into. Which Bucky guessed was understandable enough with the bomb he'd just dropped on him. He shouldn't have said it- but it was too late now.

"Can I be honest?" He'd said a few minutes ago now as they stepped out back into the dark. Someone had gotten sick in the bunks and Gale's weak stomach needed some air before he joined the poor kid. Bucky followed- not wanting to have him out of his sight. Not when he'd just gotten him back.

Gale lifted his eyes, swiping his tongue over his chapped bottom lip. "Don't remember a time you haven't been."

"I don't know if I can be your best man." He spat out, rushing to keep talking before Gale could jump in. "I know- I know you love her, I'm- I want you to be with her, I just,"

He paused, unsure of where he'd been going with that, embarrassed that he'd said anything at all. The tips of his ears burned, even in the cold.

"Just what?" Gale said, Bucky unable to read his tone one way or another. He just sounded like Buck.

It fell quiet between them for a moment, Gale speaking up again after a few minutes had passed.

“What happened to being honest, hm?” He said, knocking against his shoulder and god damn if he didn’t know the way right to Bucky’s chest.

“I wish I was a girl, or that you were a girl. Either way, if it meant you know, that we could,”

He thought better of finishing that sentence. Gale knew what he meant anyhow.

“Well I’m not, you’re not,” He said slowly, his voice sounding wobbly. Bucky exhaled, shaking his head as snowflake fell right into his eye.

“Yeah, I kinda figured that out already.”

Under different circumstances the quip would’ve made them both laugh. Not tonight.

“But you’re still do it, won’t you? For me?” Gale asked, and Bucky forced a half smile.

“Course I will Buck."

Demarco came out to tell them things were cleaned up and they wandered back inside, crawling into their respective bunks. If any of the other guys sensed something was off they didn’t put a voice to it. Or say anything if they saw Gale press a kiss to the tips of his fingers before he reached across to press his fingers into the side of Bucky’s neck. Bucky, who returned the gesture just like he did every night.

“Who?”

Bucky rubbed his eyes, opening them gradually to the sight of morning light coming in from behind the curtains, and Loretta all of two inches from his face. She was still in her pajamas, bed head falling into her eyes. She looked between Bucky and where her father seemed to be getting her breakfast ready, a sight Bucky could only make out through blurred half asleep vision.

“Come here baby, he’s still sleeping,” Gale said from across the room and his voice managed to wake him completely up. “It’s okay, ‘m up,” He said tiredly, sitting up on the couch and rubbing his eyes, pushing a hand back through his hair before getting up.

Loretta gave him another inquisitive look as he plopped down at the table uninvited, narrowing her eyes at Gale with another “Who?”.

“Man, you gotta formally introduce me or your kid’s gonna turn into an owl.”

Gale shot him what he could only describe as a *look* over her head, but softened his eyes when his daughter looked up at him.

“This is John, peanut. One of me and mama’s friends from a long time ago,”

His tone was light, presumably for Loretta’s sake more than anything- but Bucky could still hear the tension in it.

Loretta tilted her head at him, a giggle escaping when he tilted his back at her.

“Mama’s frien’?” She said, mouth full of pancake and he could hear the breath Gale sucked in from where he’d disappeared into the kitchen.

“I sure did know your mama, she was real pretty just like you.”

Loretta went back to eating then, Bucky putting both hands on the table to push up and meander into the kitchen where Gale was washing dishes while he read some sort of report. Bucky hadn’t asked what the situation was with his work and losing Marge, but he’d assumed he’d swung some amount of time off.

“Hey, let me be useful.” He said, taking the sponge right out of his hand and careful to not drip any water onto the report sitting on the counter. Gale didn’t stop him, but didn’t look enthused either.

“You should call Blakely, have him help you find a hotel so you can sort out a flight home.” He said, Bucky not looking up from the plate he was washing.

“I’m not leavin’ Buck.”

Gale huffed, clapping him on the shoulder as he passed behind him. “And you’re not staying here. Whether you want to sit in a hotel daydreaming or get back to the Pentagon is up to you I suppose.”

Bucky didn’t bother to respond to that, content with the fact that Gale going to sit down with his report at least meant he was letting him

help out as opposed to not so much as letting him wash one of his *sacred* dishes. He took a step back to grab the paper towel roll off the table, Loretta picking up a blueberry off her plate and holding it out to him.

“Wan’ one?” She said, and Bucky couldn’t say no to that little face.

“Well isn’t that sweet, thank you honey.” He replied as he took it off her and tossed it right into his mouth. Loretta giggled, sticking another one on the tip of her finger and pointing it up at him. “‘nother one?”

They repeated it a few more times, the game quickly turning into the three-year-old throwing her blueberries at Bucky’s face- highly amused by his dexterity to catch every one in his mouth. Bucky was expecting Gale’s voice to boom across the room and tell him to quit it.

But when he glanced back towards the living room, he found the other man watching them fondly.

He looked back down at the report he was reading as soon as Bucky’s eyes met his, a dry laugh escaping him at that- that Gale didn’t want to seem like he was enjoying this.

After breakfast Bucky kept himself busy with cleaning around, not wanting to take a single second that he wasn’t being kicked out for granted. There was more he wanted to say to him before the inevitable, but he waited until Loretta was off playing in her room before wandering out to find him.

Gale was still reading in the living room, and didn’t look up when Bucky parked himself on the couch arm next to him.

“When do you go out for the funeral?” He asked.

“2 days. Loretta’s stayin with Blakely and his wife. Her family’s ticked, but she’s three. Not sure she’d get anything out of it other than a reminder that mama’s gone.”

Bucky was pleasantly surprised he’d actually given him an answer, and the gears started to turn in his head as he mulled it over.

The same gears that slowed when he noticed something he hadn’t before.

On the interior of the folder Gale was reading from there was a photo paperclipped to the pocket. He was looking at it upside down and halfway covered by a paper, but he could see it enough to tell it was Marge holding what looked like newborn Loretta. Gale stood next to her, beaming at both of his girls.

“Should’ve said this yesterday, Buck but I’m sorry for your loss.” He said, watching as Gale looked at the photo he seemed to have forgotten was there until he realized Bucky saw it.

He let out a little sigh, and Bucky thought he might really be getting somewhere. Until he moved his paper to cover it, looking up and past his head at the phone on the wall.

“Go call Blakely.”

Now, Bucky was a stubborn man. But he decided to listen this time, even if he did feel some sense of relief when Blakely didn’t pick up.

Gale looked less amused.

“No answer.” He said as he hung the phone up, walking over to plop down on the windowsill across the room from him. The room was silent save for the air conditioner rattling and the faint noise of Loretta playing down the hall. Bucky expected Gale to say something- to tell him he should leave and go track Blakely down instead of sitting in his living room- that he’d tell him he left if he called back.

But he said nothing. Bucky looked up from where he’d been popping his knuckles, and his gut twisted in unpreparedness when he saw that Gale was looking right at him. Studying him- like he was looking for something.

Bucky swallowed.

“I thought I was doin’ the noble thing you know.” He started slowly, giving Gale time to cut him off. But he didn’t, just continued to burn a hole into his skull.

Those big blue eyes always had a way of getting him to talk.

“Leaving well enough alone, not intruding on your life with your woman, anymore than I already had. I knew we couldn’t- be involved anymore. Thought it would be selfish if I kept coming around hoping one night that would change.”

It was the truth, every last word of it. But there was one issue.

“Yeah well you didn’t *say* that.” Gale blurted, leaning forward, pressing his palms against one another. “You stopped writing, wouldn’t give anyone who asked for me your contact number when you moved around."

His voice was tight, like a rope being pulled at two ends and fraying- coming close to snapping the tighter it was pulled.

“I said I thought-” Bucky tried and Gale interrupted.

“You weren’t in a good place, the last time we talked. You wouldn’t say it, but I could tell.”

Well, that wasn’t far from the truth. It wasn’t long after the wedding, only a few days after he’d returned home from his honeymoon. Bucky could hear him smiling on the other end of the phone as he told him all about it, and it made him nauseous.

He decided a few minutes into the conversation what he had to do.

“I remember it just hit me one night- when I realized it wasn’t a fluke that I couldn’t get a hold of you. Woke me right up. Marge was trying to talk me off the ledge while I’m sitting by the phone hoping someone I can get a hold of who’d tell me is awake.”

It took Bucky a minute to process what Gale was implying, and he couldn’t help the shaky breath that escaped him when he did.

“Buck,” He said just as much to himself as the man across from him, curling his fingers as he continued.

“Was relieved at first- that you hadn't done something so *stupid* . But then I had to sit with knowing you were out there, and okay. You just didn’t want to know me anymore. Damn everything we went through- the war, all of it,"

The phone rang and cut through the tension in the air like a knife, Bucky not moving off the couch at first. Not until Gale sucked in his cheek, nodding his head in the direction of it like he was giving him permission.

Blakely said he’d be over in twenty minutes, a time crunch that Bucky could only assume was due to him thinking Gale was about ready to

throw him out in the most literal sense. But leaving now made his chest tight, even if Gale showed no interest in continuing their interrupted conversation after he'd hung up. He couldn't shake it- any part of it.

That Gale had assumed he'd offed himself- that he couldn't keep telling himself he did the right thing after seeing it all over Gale's face that that couldn't be further from the truth.

He followed him outside when he went out to his car to wait for him, which Bucky hadn't expected. Lingering by his car as Bucky climbed into the driver's seat, he looked out at the road wordlessly, arms crossed over his body.

"You leave for her funeral on Saturday- what time?" Bucky asked and Gale didn't turn his gaze to him when he replied.

"Not exactly sure her family would be pleased to see you John, I can offer your condolences myself."

Bucky didn't know how to interpret that. He couldn't imagine Gale, or Marge had told them anything outright. Though it wouldn't have taken much for them to come to their own conclusions, he supposed. He knew enough people in their circle had, even if they never put a voice to it.

"Didn't say I was gonna go shake hands with her folks." He replied, taping his fingers on the steering wheel as he continued. "You got a hotel, didn't you?"

It was stupid, and he was sure he was a few seconds from being told to fuck off. But he'd had it in his head since Gale told him when he was going that he'd at least attempt to keep him from being alone in all that. If he said no, he said no.

"They won't even know I'm there."

Gale seemed to be mulling it over when Blakely pulled up, waiting about five seconds before he leaned on his horn, sticking his face out the window.

"Stop buggin' him and c'mon!" He yelled, and Gale took a step back to let him shut his door.

Bucky put the car in reverse, but didn't put his window up, stopping before he backed completely out of the driveway.

“So I show up on Saturday, you gonna slam the door in my face again?”

Gale huffed, running a hand through his hair with a little, looking away from him,

“We’ll see.”

Bucky grinned, and could’ve sworn he saw a hint of a chuckle from the other man when he gave him a snappy salute as he pulled away.

Chapter End Notes

(can you tell my preferred writing form is playwriting from how dialouge heavy my shit is- sorry LOL)

ahh...boys boys boys. what to do with them. as always feel free to come yell at my via anon on tumblr bcolfanfic!

Chapter 3: three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Why have you come to me here, dear heart, with all these instructions? I promise you I will do everything just as you ask. But come closer."

- The Iliad

This time when Bucky showed up on Gale's porch with balls of steel and a dream he didn’t get the door slammed in his face.

“Gotta drop Lortetta off at Blakely’s, I assume you haven’t arranged your own transportation to Wyoming.” He said, and sounded *somewhat* annoyed- but not as much as he had the last time Bucky was here.

“Nope.”

He popped the last syllable, smiling when he saw Loretta come running down the hallway behind where Gale was standing in the doorway.

“Hi Jo-hn!” She squealed, shimmying past her father and right into Bucky’s leg, giggling in his ear as he scooped her up.

“Hey princess, you excited to go to Uncle Blakely’s house?”

Loretta nodded, kicking her feet and getting him right in the rib with one of her Mary Jane shoes.

When he winced and Gale apologized on her behalf, Bucky noticed a softness in his voice- and eyes that he didn’t think he’d seen directed towards him yet.

Gale is less inclined to bite your head off when you're holding his kid. He thought. *Noted.*

“John’s house?” Loretta questioned, looking at him inquisitively.

“Hmm, well my house is allll the way in Washington DC, but you and your daddy can come see me there sometime, yeah?”

He didn't dare look at how Gale must've reacted to that suggestion, choosing to focus on the little girl in his arms. Tufts of her blond hair slipped out of her braids and into her eyes, her cheeks flushing pink when she laughed. John was absolutely fascinated by her, by there being another Gale Cleven in the world, just in different form.

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They dropped her off at Blakely's without any pomp and circumstance, though he did look amused when he came out to the car and saw Bucky in the passenger seat.

"You're not holding him at gun point are you?" He said as he leaned into the window, Gale getting out to grab Loretta.

Bucky laughed, tapping his fingers against his thigh. "Nah, thankfully I didn't have to go to plan B."

Looking past Blakely's head, he saw Gale passing Loretta off to Blakely's wife. He kissed the little girl on the head, stroking the back of her head and giving her little hand a squeeze. "Daddy loves you," He heard Gale say softly, "I'll see you later baby, okay?"

Blakely looked over his shoulder to follow Bucky's gaze, one hand on the roof of the car.

"Buck's a good father." He said, and Bucky nodded, averting his eyes when Gale turned back around. "Yeah, I had a feeling he would be."

There was a flight that he talked himself into- assisted by it being delayed and a handful of passengers opting for a different one, and by nightfall they were walking into a hotel.

The last time he'd followed Gale into a hotel was in London, the time he'd successfully convinced him to come with him on a weekend pass. It'd been a good weekend.

A *really* good weekend.

That John definitely shouldn't be thinking about me when they were here for a funeral.

Gale waved him off after they'd checked in, mumbling something about finding a phone to call Marge's folks on before placing the room keys in his palm and telling him he could head upstairs.

Their hands grazed during the pass over, the calluses on Gale's fingers brushing against his wrist finding Bucky sucking in his bottom lip.

Thankfully- or not, Bucky considered, Gale had a one track mind. He watched him walk off in the direction of the pay phones on the other side of the lobby, only turning around to go upstairs when the elevator nearby dinging prompted him to move.

-

He'd made his peace with sleeping on the couch, but with Gale still downstairs he took advantage of the time to flop onto the bed when he was out of his day clothes, letting out a deep sigh.

When he'd had dinner with Blakely two nights ago after leaving Gale's the other man asked what exactly he was doing here.

"I mean- no harm in making amends with Buck. I think its good of you to apologize and right that wrong. But you know just as well as I do, and he does, that that's not the only reason you're here, yeah?"

"I don't know what the other reason is. Honest."

"I don't know." was the truth then and was still the truth now. The complicated relationship he'd always had with that pesky concept notwithstanding. If you'd told him 3 weeks ago the Marge would be dead, and he'd be laying in some hotel in Wyoming with Gale he would've thought he was losing his mind again- like had in the Stalags.

But this was, somehow, as real as could be, that further cemented when he was pulled out of his thoughts by the door opening. He didn't have enough time to move before Gale's gaze fell on where he was sprawled out on the bed- eyes darting from him to the couch and back.

"Hey- not gonna make you sleep on the couch." Bucky said, pulling himself up to sit up against the headboard, and look a little less pathetic. "Just needed couple minutes, my back,"

"You do something to it?" Gale asked as he sat down on the empty sofa and toed his shoes off, opening his suitcase where he'd set it on the floor.

"Jumped out of a B-17 and got kicked around by the Nazis all the way to a POW camp. You shoulda' been there."

That got a small laugh out of Gale, Bucky keeping his mouth moving, a self-made distraction so he was doing something that wasn't just watching Buck strip down to his undergarments to put on his night clothes.

"Hasn't been the same since all that. Doc says there isn't much they can do, don't do back transplants yet,"

Gale gave him a nod, with what looked like a hint of another laugh- this one more suppressed than the last, before he walked off to brush his teeth.

Tilting his head back and shutting his eyes- Bucky tried to revel in a final few comfortable minutes before he had to move. And he just about to finally force himself over to the couch, when he was damn near startled by the bed dipping.

Lifting his head, he felt like a volt of electricity had just been shot through him when he saw Gale.

The last time he was this close to him was the last time they'd *fuck* , he *really* didn't need to be thinking about this now.

"Oh, hey- said I was gonna," He started to stutter out, and found himself talking to a pillow by the end of his sentence, Gale wedging it between them like a wall. It was a bad wall, Bucky could still see the top of his head over it, could feel him breathing behind it.

But a wall nonetheless.

"Goodnight John."

Gale woke early the next morning, Bucky half asleep as he watched him get ready from bed.

He looked sharp in his dress uniform, his hair slicked- and in his half asleep state Bucky saw the Buck Cleven he knew back when. A little worse for the wear, but his Buck nonetheless. Bucky watched as he checked himself in the mirror, running a hand over his face and taking a deep breath and exhaling into his palm.

Not saying anything felt wrong, but before he could find his bearings enough to figure something out Gale was gone- and he let himself be tugged back to sleep.

-

He was out for the majority of the day, and Bucky didn't do much save for sit with his thoughts until he forced himself out of bed to figure out food for the night. Gale had mentioned in passing the day before that he'd be back before dinner, and that they could find somewhere to go. But Bucky had a feeling he wouldn't be up for that, rubbing his eyes as he picked the room service menu up off the coffee table, hoping Gale still liked the same things he did years ago.

As luck would have it Gale came through the door just after the food had, Bucky unable to read his face with how he had his head tucked away from him. On purpose, he supposed.

"Hey- there's dinner if you want it. Didn't figure you'd be up to going out."

If Gale heard him there was no acknowledgement, and he went right into the bathroom, shutting the door with a thud behind him.

And It wasn't that Bucky didn't understand or want to give him as much space as he could in a shared hotel room. But fifteen minutes went by, and the sob that escaped from the other side of the bathroom door found him on his feet.

He knocked lightly on the wood, lowering his voice.

"Buck, you alright?"

There was no reply, only some strangled noises that sounded like Gale was *trying* to stop crying- and couldn't.

"I'm gonna come in, you aren't decent, you can start screamin' or something."

He opened the door just enough to step in and shut it behind him, his heart catching in his throat at the sight of Gale. His eyes were puffy when he looked up at Bucky from where he was seated on the toilet seat lid, one hand trembling against his cheek.

"I'm- I'm alright." Gale said, wiping his sleeve under his nose, taking a shuddering breath. "You don't wanna see me cryin' over her, I know you don't."

"Like hell you're alright Buck, you just buried your wife."

He'd tempered his tone, made it as soft as he could manage. Which didn't seem to have the intended effect on Gale.

Exhaling through his nose, he tightened his hand where it had come to rest on the leg of his dress pants.

"Don't pretend you care that she's gone, John." He said, and when he looked back up his eyes had hardened. "Gave you an excuse to come after me again. Give you your storybook in, Bucky's the hero, saving the poor widower from grieving the woman that ruined everything, that bit-"

"Gale."

Gale gulped, a flash of vulnerability in his face before he steeled his expression. John put one hand on the sink, looking at him squarely.

"I wouldn't call Marge that over my dead body and I know you don't wanna finish that sentence either." He said. "Even if it's just shit you're putting in my mouth."

If he wanted to keep arguing, he swallowed it- sucking the inside of his cheek.

"I'll be out in a minute, go eat." He said curtly, seeming relieved when the other man listened.

-

True to his word Gale did appear from the bathroom shortly after Bucky walked out, shedding his jacket as he sat down across from him at the table.

He picked at his food more than he actually ate much of it, looking quite close to starting to cry again. Bucky cleared his throat.

"Y' don't have to believe me I guess, but I wouldn't lie to you Buck, 'm not just here to spite Marge. She was a good woman- good to you, I'm not so selfish I can't give her that much."

Gale didn't look like he completely bought that, but there wasn't venom in his eyes this time when he put his fork down to look at him. Just pain.

"Believed y' for a long time and look how that turned out." He replied, and Bucky felt the lump in his throat double in size. "Everyone leaves-

you, my wife. Might as well start preparing for something to happen to Loretta,”

When his daughter's name left his mouth his voice cracked, and he covered his mouth with the heel of his hand.

“Hey, no.” Bucky started. Everything in him wanted to reach for Gale’s other hand where it was resting, index finger about rubbing a hole in the tablecloth. But he settled for letting his fall right next to it. “I made a mistake. And I want to make it up to you Buck but you’ve gotta let me try here.”

“Okay.” Gale said with an exhale. He looked down at his lap- squeezing his eyes shut and opening them again before going back to his meal.

They both turned in for the night into bed without so much as discussing the couch, Gale erecting the same pillow wall as he had the night before.

When the dark room fell quiet save for the footsteps of the people in the room above them, Bucky thought the other man had fallen right to sleep, exhausted from the day. Until he finally started to drift off himself, and was stirred awake by his voice.

“John?”

“Hm?”

A beat of silence passed before Gale shifted to press the pillow wall down with his forearm. He didn’t look Bucky right in the face, only shifted his eyes to the side from where he was laying on his stomach looking at the headboard.

“Thank you, for coming- I , I know you're trying."

He was expecting him to move his arm then, put the wall back up and turn over. But a second passed, and then another ten and Gale was still looking at him out of the corner of his eye. Like he was waiting for something. Bucky swallowed.

“Thanks for not shooting me between the eyes when I showed up on your porch unannounced.”

Gale laughed under his breath at the same time he did, shaking his

head to the extent that he could lying down. “Yeah, you’re welcome.”

It seemed like there was something he wanted to say, his mouth opening, shutting and opening again- eyes raking over John's face.

“Goodnight.”

And whether that was what he'd been going for or not he let it be his final utterance before he turned his head in the other direction.

Bucky didn't know what to do with the feeling that rose in his chest when Gale didn’t move his arm to spring the pillow between them back up. His fingers where his hand had come to rest were centimeters from brushing against him, so close he had to squint in the dark to verify that they was still a gap between them.

He scooted closer, testing- and whatever was going on his chest just *kept happening* when Gale didn't move.

“Y’ forgot the light.”

Gale lifted his head a bit, mumbling in confusion when he looked at the bedside lamp, which was very much off.

Reaching over him, Bucky tugged the string to turn it back on, waiting a second before pulling on it a second time to switch it off.

“Bucky *huh*,” Gale started to mumble again, whatever he was going to say next dying on his tongue when John's arm fell against his back.

John waited one, two seconds, half expecting Buck to tell him to move- or worse tell him to go take his rightful spot on the couch.

But he didn’t, and if John Egan was put on the stand about this moment, he’d swear on God himself that he felt the other man scoot back into him, just a little.

“Goodnight Gale.”

Chapter End Notes

smooth one bucky, smooth one.

insert "sorry im in law school" apology for this update being so delayed, trust i'm not abandoning y'all <3

Chapter 4: four

Chapter Notes

helen is ev's wife in every au of mine now bc i said so (:

also for people who didnt grow up on bases, an exchange is kinda like a shopping mall but not? its where the food court/pharmacy/ the barber and one or two small department stores live. as far as i can tell from my googling some version of this did indeed exist on bases in the 50s.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ah my friend, if you and I could escape this fray and live forever, never a trace of age, immortal, I would never fight on the front lines again.”

- The Iliad

As John slowly stirred from his slumber, he realized Gale wasn’t where he’d fallen asleep against him. Squeezing his eyes shut and then open, he pushed up on his arm and caught a glimpse of the other man packing his suitcase on the other side of the room.

Gale was already dressed, looking up at him with a sense of skittishness about the way his hands were fiddling with his bag.

"Mornin’.”

His small smile as he spoke to him didn’t quite reach his eyes, and John might've thought more of it if he wasn't so tired- mumbling a halfhearted greeting and rolling back over for five extra minutes.

They didn’t talk much on the journey back, Gale only really acknowledging him to ask what time it was because he’d accidentally thrown his watch into his suitcase. When they made it back to San Bernadino in one piece and got Loretta back, John idled needlessly in the background, feeling an awful lot like he was intruding. He figured that if Gale wanted to say anything to him about the night before- good or bad- he would've by now. But he didn't quite know what to do with *nothing* either.

He dug his foot into the grass as he watched Gale talk to Helen, all

while not looking at her to fuss over his daughter, twirling one of her curls around his finger as he swayed where he stood. It wasn't lost on John that if Marge dying hadn't pushed here then he would've missed this entirely.

He decided to shelf that for now- and when Blakely came up and suggested they go down to the exchange for a late lunch, he gave the Clevens an awkward wave and couldn't get in the other man's car fast enough.

"So did The Pentagon tell you they're gonna take you to court for being a deserter yet?" Blakely quipped as John slid into the food court booth across from him, a sly smile playing on his lips as he stirred his coffee.

John chuckled wearily in response. "Nah, I'm on reconnaissance."

"For The Pentagon or for Buck?"

"Both?" John said, looking down at his soda and sucking his bottom lip between his teeth.

The next question hit closer to home.

"So tagging along for the funeral wasn't too bad then? Gale wasn't exactly throwin' you out of his car by the ear."

John lifted his head, trying to think of how much would even be appropriate to tell him. Blakely knew in some capacity what had once been, was one of the few of did- by happenstance.

But what had happened in the hotel felt more fragile.

At least too much so to be talking about it with him over a hot dog.

Before he could give it much more thought, he was jolted back to reality by the sound of approaching footsteps and Blakely clearing his throat. Looking up, John saw the man that he halfway recognized as who must be Gale's commanding officer making his way towards their table.

"Major Egan," Colonel Williams greeted, nodding at John and extending his hand. "Colonel Williams, your buddy Cleven's big guy."

"Ah," John replied as he stood, shaking his hand. "Good to meet you, Colonel."

The Colonel motioned for them to sit back down and slid in next to Blakely, John finding himself shaking his leg under the table as he kept talking, unable to quash the urge to fill whatever kind of silence this was with *something.*

“I know Major Cleven appreciates how understanding you’ve been with everything.”

“I’m sure he appreciates you as well,” Williams remarked “But I heard your post is in Washington- you’re quite a way from home.”

Cracking his knuckles in his lap, John gave a shrug, “Think they were glad to get me outta their hair for a little bit,”

“I can imagine,” Williams replied wryly. “Your reputation precedes you Major.”

John saw his friend across the table's face shift into something that almost looked akin to panic, realizing his own expression must have mirrored his when there was a stiff laugh from the Colonel’s direction.

“Oh believe me, I can’t begin to imagine anyone could get through what you boys did without some brevity.” He said, leaning in without lowering his voice. “And from what I know of Major Cleven I don’t picture that was comin’ from him.”

And that was that then. John really didn’t like this guy.

But much to his relief the Colonel was beckoned over by another table and with a parting greeting to the both of them he was gone, Blakely watching him walk away before he lowered his voice.

“I’d be careful around him,” he said slowly, glancing in his direction briefly.

“Yeah, I get the sense he’s a real shit.”

John didn’t match Blakely’s lowered tone, circling a fry in the direction he'd walked off to. But based on the other man's expression he inferred that he should have.

“Not sayin’ he’s onto the two of you or knows anything about all *that* ,” he continued. “But that guy’s blue discharge happy – five guys just this year. Heard he’s like that ‘cause it happened to his son and he’s trying to make up for the embarrassment.”

By the end of his sentence, he was speaking so quietly John more or less had to lip read.

Not that the sentiment didn't call for it. He swallowed, squeezing his fingers in one hand. They'd been lucky back then, some sort of haphazard shield provided by the chaos of the war. But even in the absence of that fog, he couldn't help a chuckle on his breath. The way things were going with Gale, he'd tell Blakely if they were truly alone, it wasn't like they were doing anything they shouldn't be caught doing anytime soon- or possibly *ever*.

Maybe for the better too, considering.

John blinked when Blakely turned his car to drive back towards Gale's street instead of in the direction of the hotel he still had booked under his name. When he threw him a sideways glance, Blakely just drummed his fingers on the streeting wheel, smiling to no one in particular.

"Buck's request." He said. John nodded, sitting up a little straighter and sucking his lips in, fighting his own smile *that surely meant nothing.*

Of course, it was possible Gale had requested his presence to throw him out once and for all, tell him to scamper onto back to Washington where he belonged. But Blakely was being *weird,* and John considered that he wouldn't seem so chipper if he was driving him to his final demise.

When he walked inside, Gale was just hanging up the phone, the hand that had been holding it now rubbing over his face. The weariness was evident in his posture.

"Hey, something wrong?"

Gale looked out from behind his hand, dropping it unceremoniously against the wall. "They want me back to work as normal tomorrow," He replied "I knew it was comin' Don't think I'd like it no matter when they called, I guess."

"Who's watching Loretta?"

The cogs started turning in John's head, towards something he hoped wouldn't be a bullet into his foot.

"Helen I guess," Gale said. “Was gonna call her here in a minute and ask. Don’t know why I didn’t sort this out sooner guess I’m just-.”

Just used to my dead wife bein’ a stay at home mom John completed in his head when Gale stopped, considering throwing out his ask for now. Surely he still had a way to go with earning his trust- with earning any sort of place here, in this.

But when he met Gale's eyes, he saw something he hadn’t seen yet in the few days he’d been back. Something he hadn’t seen since he left Wyoming after the wedding, when Gale told him not to be a stranger.

He couldn’t run from his own damn self now. Not this time.

"Let me?"

“Let you what?"

Gale searched his face like he was looking for a sign of insincerity and John took a deep breath, steeling himself.

“Y’know, watch Loretta," he said.

Gale's expression softened, a flicker of relief in his eyes, even when the next words out of his mouth were another question. "You have work too, do you not?"

"Got a meeting in the morning with some guys the Pentagon wants me to talk to, but that's it." John replied, "I can bring her- have her color or something, it’s not gonna be more than an hour."

Gale just stared at him for what felt like a long few seconds, quirking his mouth to the side- sucking his cheek in. Finally, he nodded.

"Okay," he said quietly. "Okay, sure.”

There was a moment of silence between them that edged into awkward, John rubbing elbow and looking off at the wall. Gale broke first, clearing his throat.

“I finished sorting Marge’s stuff out, by the way,” he said, and John turned his head back to him so quick it made his neck burn. “The guest room is yours if you want it.”

John hesitated. One part of him was relieved- for the fact that this felt like some sort of olive branch. The other part of him was still in bed next to Gale at the hotel, something that felt akin to guilt clawing its

way towards his frontal lobe.

“I- I don’t want to be in your hair, I got a hotel, like you asked.”

“I’m sure, I…” Gale trailed off, scratching the back of his neck. “Easier for tomorrow at least, with you watchin Loretta.”

He's not letting me say no John realized, the realization that he was doing the exact opposite of throwing him out making his chest constrict. Gale wanted him here- in his house, in his bedroom down the hall. Gale still only seemed incline to speak to him in sentence fragments and barley looked at him.

But he didn't want him to leave. John could work with that much.

John fell asleep in Gale’s guest bedroom and woke up in the same place.

The house was quiet as they pattered around in the morning, Gale more focused on leaving Loretta than anything else. What he did say to him was the same instructions in regards to the three year old repeated about every five minutes. John just nodded along, making assurances they'd be just fine that he wasn't quite sure Gale believed.

"Y' know they let me handle bombs Buck, I think I can handle a three year old."

Gale looked up from where he was bent down tying his shoes, tightening the laces with an extra tug.

"You planning on dropping my kid outta' a plane?" He said, as he stood.

It was harsh, but John knew that low tone that Gale used to keep from laughing- recognized even when he hadn't heard it in years.

Shaking his head amusedly, he called Loretta over from where she'd been idling in the kitchen. She made a pitstop at John legs first, and he found himself near peeling the little girl off of him to actually say goodbye to her father. Gale's face looked like it was going to crumple at any second, John turning his eyes to the floor.

Kissing her head no short of 50 times, he made her promise to be good for *Mister John* before he seemed to have to force himself to step over the threshold, eyes remaining where she was waving from behind the

screen door as he got into his truck.

He blew her a kiss before he drove off, and if John pretended it was also for him then that was his own cross to carry.

-

Bringing her to his morning meeting went well enough, Loretta content to sit and color at an unoccupied desk where John could see her. The couple people who commented were cordial, commending John for his commitment to his friend in a way that seemed more genuine that Colonel William's sentiments the day before.

He surmised he likely should've expected it- but especially after having to sit still in an office building for an hour Loretta was a ball of energy in a way John hadn't been in a long time. Nor did the energy seem to wane, and by 3:30 he could feel himself counting down the minutes till Gale would be home.

After about 20 minutes of playing in her room, Loretta padded down the hallway and came over to where John was sitting on the couch reading. She folded her arms over his knees, dropping her chin there. The twenty minutes she'd taken off from being his shadow was a welcome reprieve, but he didn't have the heart to send her off again. Not with those eyes.

She looked down and huffed, looking back up at him to make sure he'd seen it.

"Booooooreddd."

John chuckled, tapping his foot against the floor, and Loretta giggled when it bobbed her head.

After another minute of that, he glanced out the window and put down his book before hunching forward to be eye to eye with her.

"You know if your daddy has a bike?"

Loretta pointed out the back door, and nudged her forward a little so he could stand up. He grabbed his shoes with the little girl on his tail and ushered her outside, scooping her up onto his hip when he realized he'd forgotten *her* shoes.

Can't have Gale chewing me out if she gets bitten by a snake or something- he thought at the back of his mind.

He pulled the bike from where it was resting against the backside of the house with one hand, shifting Loretta on his side. “Your daddy ever show you the real fun way to ride this thing?” He said, and her eyebrows quirked just like Gale’s did at some of John’s ideas once upon a time.

Dragging the bike out of the backyard to the front of the house, he got it to the edge of the driveway before stopping to plop Loretta on the handlebars. John placed his hands over hers and held onto them as tightly as he could without hurting her, saying a silent prayer to God and all his dead friends that this wouldn’t go as comically bad as it very well could.

"You gotta hold on real tight, little lady, you got it?” He said, giving her hands a squeeze. "Cause I know someone who's gonna have my head if you bonk that pretty noggin."

She tilted her head back to look at him, giggling when John widened his eyes at her, poking his tongue out a he started to pedal.

Just about every other second of the ten minutes they went in loops around the cul de sac he spent terrified Loretta was going to fall off.

But John couldn’t remember the last time that life felt this easy. The sparrows were singing, and Gale had trusted him with his little daughter that- if her laughter meant anything- was having the time of her life with him. Gale, Gale, Gale- wanted him around again, wanted to let him *try*, in spite of everything.

Suddenly thinking about going back to Washington when the call came filled him with dread.

-

Loretta yawned when he was bringing her inside, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "Nigh nigh," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper as she pressed her face into the crook of John’s neck, shimmying in his arms to get more comfortable.

He walked over to the window and pushed the curtain back, brushing his hand against Loretta’s cheek and pivoting to get her to look. “It’s only 4pm lil’ peanut, see? Sun’s still out.”

“Nigh nigh.”

“Yeah okay, I guess.” He conceded at her insistence, slipping his shoes

off before plopping down in Gale's living room recliner. "You gonna go anywhere if I take a nap too?"

Loretta shook her head, pressing her face back into his neck and reaching for one of his hands- moving it in the direction of her hair.

He couldn't help the soft laugh that escaped at the image of Gale giving her this same princess treatment, stroking his fingers through her curls as she fell asleep- and joining her soon after.

Work had been downright miserable, to put it mildly, if you asked Gale.

Between the constant stream of condolences for Marge's passing and the nagging thoughts of John that seemed to persist despite his best efforts, he struggled to think straight. He couldn't shake the feeling he should have been firmer with him from the start, insisted he scram and meant it.

The answer to the question of why he didn't do exactly that made his mouth dry up. Just like it had when he told Blakely to swing John back after they went out for lunch.

But thankfully, his friend only raised an eyebrow at him- opting not to put a voice to the question that lingered there.

He couldn't deny that it hadn't been completely terrible to see John again. He was angry, still, and he had missed his friend. Having him in Wyoming, knowing he wasn't coming back from the cemetery in Wyoming to sit alone with his thoughts was...*good*. He pushed him, John pushed back and didn't run again- a welcome change to some degree. When he draped his arm around him that night his mind wandered back to the Stalag first, to John pressed against his back for warmth.

But the sterile hotel sheets triggered a different memory, one he chastised himself for letting his mind wander to. And wander to *again* when he was running it all through his mind on repeat at his desk.

At least he was pulling up after work to a house that hadn't been burned down.

He let himself inside and toed off his shoes by the door, surprised by the quiet until he looked up and found them. John was sprawled out on the recliner asleep, Loretta similarly out like a light on his chest,

grabbing onto his ear with one hand.

John had a hand on her back holding her to him, and a surge of tenderness ran through Gale so hard it made his breath catch in his throat.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

ahhh gale pov time (: the story is still gonna be in bucky's, but next chp is a "gale pov" interlude of sorts. live laugh love lortetta.

and sorry this took so long to get out. i got kinda ahead of myself re: outlining a plot line that has yet to fully unfold and really wanting to write that made writing the lead up a little hard (-:

End Notes

ahhh and off we go! pls do come hang out on tumblr at bcolfanfic. i loveee talking about my work/AUs and am always down for buck x bucky anon chat just in general.

live laugh love loretta cleven

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